

## RESEARCH ON SELF-DEFENSE

### Women's Self-Defense Frequently Asked Questions

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#### Q: Does self-defense prevent violence?

A: This is really two questions:

- First, *can women's resistance stop sexual assault?* The answer is a resounding **yes**. There is a large and nearly unanimous body of research that demonstrates that women frequently resist violence, and that their resistance is often successful. This research, of course, includes many women without self-defense training.
- Second, *does self-defense training decrease women's risk of assault?* Here the research literature is smaller, but unanimous: **Yes**. Three major studies over the past few years, including a large, randomized control trial, found that women who complete an ESD class are **at least 50-60% less likely to be raped** over the following year than similar women who did not learn self-defense (see Hollander 2014, Senn et al. 2015, Sarnquist et al. 2014, and Sinclair et al. 2013). In addition, women who completed a self-defense class were **one-third as likely to report an attempted rape**. In other words, women who learn self-defense are both more likely to avoid rape if they are attacked, *and* much less likely to be attacked in the first place.

#### Does self-defense increase a woman's risk of injury?

- No. There is an *association* between resistance and injury, in that women who resist a sexual assault are also more likely to be injured. But research that looks at the sequence of events has found that in general, the injury *precedes* the resistance. In **short, women resist because they are being injured, rather than being injured because they resist**. On average, resistance does not increase the risk of injury.

#### Shouldn't we be putting all our resources into prevention strategies focused on perpetrators?

- No. Violence against women is a complex social problem. Ultimately, large-scale social changes will be needed before violence against women can be stopped. However, this kind of social change is slow – and so far, our efforts have not been very successful. **If we focus only on perpetrator-focused, "primary" prevention strategies, we are condemning millions of women to suffering rape and sexual assault**. While we wait for these efforts to work, ESD training can provide an immediate, and effective, antidote for sexual violence.
- There has been little research on the effectiveness of prevention strategies focused on potential perpetrators. **Most strategies that have been rigorously evaluated have been found to be ineffective at preventing violence.**
- **Preventing sexual violence will require a comprehensive range of efforts.** Some efforts should be long-term (e.g., cultural climate assessment and change), others should be medium-term (e.g., bystander intervention training), and some

should be short-term (e.g., self-defense training). We do not have to choose only one approach; a complex social problem requires that we address it on multiple fronts and in multiple ways.

#### **Is self-defense training cost-effective?**

- **Yes.** Sexual assault is very expensive, in terms of post-assault medical service, legal services, and human suffering. Self-defense training, in contrast, is quite inexpensive. A recent Nairobi-based study found that comprehensive self-defense training cost US\$1.75 for every assault prevented, compared with an average of US\$86 for post-assault hospital services. Given the higher cost of medical services, it is likely that the savings would be even greater in the United States.

#### **Is self-defense victim blaming?**

- **No. Empowerment-based self-defense classes explicitly attribute responsibility for assault to perpetrators,** not victims. Just because a woman is capable of defending herself does not mean that she is responsible for doing so.
- Although self-defense training is frequently lumped in with other kinds of risk reduction advice (e.g., staying out of public spaces, traveling with a buddy, wearing modest clothing, or avoiding alcohol), it differs in important ways. Staying home, relying on others for protection, and limiting one's clothing or alcohol consumption all *constrain* women's lives. Self-defense training, in contrast, **expands women's range of action**, empowering them to make their own choices about where they go and what they do.
- Some people have worried that women who learn self-defense may blame themselves if they are later unable to prevent an attack. However, research has found that **women with self-defense training who experience a subsequent assault blame themselves no more – or even less – than women without self-defense training.** Moreover, women who are raped but physically resist are actually *less* likely than other women to blame themselves for their assault.

#### **What else should I know about self-defense training?**

- Learning self-defense empowers women in ways that go far beyond preventing assault. Empowerment self-defense training **decreases women's fear and anxiety and increases their confidence, their sense of self-efficacy, and their self-esteem.** Learning self-defense helps women feel **stronger and more confident in their bodies.** Women report **more comfortable interactions** with strangers, acquaintances, and intimates, both in situations that seem dangerous and those that do not. Empowerment self-defense training can also be **healing to survivors of sexual violence.**

### **References and Further Resources on Women's Resistance and Self-Defense**

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### **Is self-defense victim blaming?**

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